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# House Decoration in Egyptian Nubia Prior to 1964

Armgard Goo-Grauer

This preliminary announcement will provide the outline of a publication, undertaken by Mrs. Armgard Goo-Grauer, about Nubian women's house decoration, as it existed until 1964, the year the Nubians had to leave their homeland as a consequence of the construction of the Aswan High Dam.

The publication is based on a field study of women's house decoration, which the author undertook in former Egyptian Nubia between 1961 and 1964. Since 2009 the results have been revised on the basis of further investigation in the villages to which the Nubians were relocated. The study will analyze this art form, relate it to the social and cultural context in which it was created and include a selection of previously unpublished photographs. The documentary value of this material is enhanced by the fact that its physical and social context does not exist any more.

While some of Nubia's antiquities could be saved from the flooding of the Aswan Dam through the initiative of a UNESCO campaign, the homeland of the Nubians vanished without much attention from the global community. Between 1963–1964 about 100,000 Nubians of Egyptian and Sudanese nationality had to be evacuated. Their villages were submerged by the waters of Lake Nasser, and the decorated mud brick houses and wall paintings were submerged with them.

After the resettlement of the Egyptian Nubians in relocation villages near Kom Ombo, about 50 kilometers north of Aswan, house decoration did not continue, except for a few limited and brief initial attempts.

Prior to the dam, the artistic and cultural importance of the art of Nubian house decoration was unique and unparalleled in the neighboring regions. It covered a broad spectrum both in choice of motif and style. Nubian culture was distinctive for its special combination

of Islamic and non-Islamic religious practices. Its life forms and cultural orientation were influenced by the relationship between the genders. Due to widespread male labor migration, an economic consequence of the three dam constructions that have afflicted Nubia since 1902, the women who were left behind carried the full responsibility for all labor and family issues that arose. They not only maintained Nubian tradition and culture in the villages, but also achieved a relatively high level of independence, remarkable for a Muslim community at the time. They expressed their artistic creativity first and foremost in wall paintings. This artistic creativity was a prominent feature of their Nubian identity.

The repertoire of topics in their wall paintings predominantly reflected their surroundings, supplemented by mere ornamental patterns. Plants and animals were the most prominent topic of painting, followed by the representation of human beings. Some figurative paintings were self-portraits of the female painters, recognizable in details of dress and hairstyle. Additional motifs included objects of daily life, such as sailboats, water containers or jewelry. These representations could either show the actual belongings of a woman or express her desire to own the painted item.

The Muslim prohibition on depicting the human form was not obeyed since women generally seem to have been unaware of that idea. Women's minimal religious knowledge of orthodox tenets was due to a lack of education. They were, however, rather intensively engaged with popular Islamic beliefs and practices, which were reflected in the paintings. Besides fulfilling a purely decorative function of beautifying and adorning a house, the paintings also aimed at indicating status. Certain motifs served protective purposes as well, particularly with respect to guarding against the evil eye.

Paintings could be placed on all available walls of a house or compound. They were concentrated in the bride's room, the guest room, the façade and around the entry gate. There they often underwent a harmonious interplay with the architectonic embellishments of the building and with objects inserted into the wall, like ceramic plates and mirrors.

Elaborate house decoration was especially prevalent in the most economically deprived northern part of Nubia, where it varied from village to village and featured local characteristics. Reasons to paint could be secular as well as religious, such as the construction of a house, a marriage, the birth of a child, the return of a male family member, or the feast for a local saint. Common to all paintings was a direct and candid approach to the themes, inspired by imagination, and a spontaneous way of depiction, its style characterized by bold simplicity and by a lack of perspective.

While by all indications house decoration was thriving particularly in the twentieth century, some of the patterns certainly reached further back, showing up in women's tattoos, on handicraft items, and on embroidery as well. Even some references to pre-Islamic times, as for example the Christian sign of the cross, would appear in the wall paintings.

Whereas women's wall painting as it existed in former Nubia ended with the evacuation, it attained new popularity in some Nubian villages near Aswan, which had remained unaffected by the Aswan Dam. It started a few years ago for the sake of tourism, featuring, for example, pharaonic icons or nostalgic scenes of traditional Nubian life. Professional men carry out the paintings. However, in the villages of the resettled Nubians near Kom Ombo there are no indications that house decoration might be revitalized. Here tourism must be ruled out as an impetus for a renewed creative activity.

It seems that lately the Nubian people have developed a growing awareness of their identity, history and culture. The author encountered a profound interest in her research and photo material, particularly caused by the fact that Nubians seldom possess their own visual documents of the submerged villages of former times. Thus this planned publication intends to make a contribution to the documentation of Nubia's artistic heritage.

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